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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

AN ADDRESS

Delivered Before the Military Order

OF THE

Loyal Legion of the United States

Commandery of Minnesota

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BY

HIRAM F. STEVENS

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

It is fitting that, in the state which was the first to establish this holiday, in the capital city where the name of the first volunteer in the great army of freedom was placed upon the roll, in the presence of the last survivor of the war governors* by whose loyal aid and energy that army was recruited and maintained, who was the first to tender troops in defense of the Union, and who, crowned with years and with honors, still goes in and out among us, his eye not dim nor his natural force abated, the Minnesota Commandery of the Loyal Legion should celebrate the day that gave to the republic, to freedom and to the world, the priceless life and memory of Abraham Lincoln.

The traveler across a continental range sees height after height rising around him in confusing grandeur, but, as he passes on down the foothills, one after another loses its contour and is obscured, until finally, when far out upon the plain, he turns at twilight for a last look, one peak alone stands out above the shadowy range, its summit piercing the clouds and radiant in the sunlight which has left the rest behind.

Thus it is in human history. As the years go by, one after another of those who have been conspicuous among their contemporaries, passes, not into oblivion, but into the

*Hon. Alexander Ramsey.

background of history, while that character is indeed colossal that towers above the horizon of its age.

It may well be said that that land is fortunate which in each century adds the name of one benefactor to the roll of the world's immortals ; a name destined to be renowned, not alone in the land that gave it birth, or in a single sphere of action, but in all lands beneath the sun, and in the universal judgment of mankind.

Such has been the fortune of America. Near the close of the eighteenth century she laid to rest the mighty Washington, and now his fame is boundless as the race. The nineteenth century has not been less prolific than its predecessors in its contribution to the list of distinguished men, but, although only a generation has passed away since the curtain fell in tragedy upon Lincoln's life, and we are yet too near the scenes in which he lived to justly estimate its lasting influence, we come, upon this closing anniversary of the century, to dedicate his memory to the ages, assured that history will yield him primacy among the illustrious leaders of his time.

During this period so much has been written and said about his life and character that little remains to be told. No tongue or pen can add to the lustre of his fame, but to his precepts and example, like those of Washington, so abundant in inspiration and guidance, we may well resort in all the vicissitudes and in every crisis of our national life.

It was long supposed that Lincoln's ancestry was as inferior as his birth was humble. Nothing is farther from the truth. He was descended, in the sixth degree, from Samuel Lincoln, of Norfolk, England, a member of the Plymouth colony, among whose descendants were three governors, an attorney general, a secretary of state, and a justice of the supreme court of the United States.

All his ancestors, except his father, were persons of enterprise, ability and prominence; all but one of them were pioneers, and all of them bore scriptural names. For fifty years before his birth they had lived in three different slave states. Thus, he inherited from an ancestry of nearly two hundred years of adventure, patriotism and sagacity, combined with deep religious sentiment, not only natural ability of a high order, but those qualities of mind and heart that enabled him to appreciate the conflicting interests and prejudices which had their respective sources at Jamestown and at Plymouth Rock, and fitted him better than any other man of his time to be the final arbiter of their destiny. His parents, it is true, were without education and of limited means. Ninety-one years ago to-day, in the rude cabin of these lowly Kentucky pioneers, began the life of him whose memory we meet to honor. His childhood was one of poverty, but it was not the poverty of dependence. His youth was one of hardship, but it was the kind of hardship that disciplines, but does not degrade. The fire of ambition burned in his bosom from his earliest years, and he made all things—books, men and events—wisely subservient to its ends. If he had little of the training of the schools, the world was his university. The books he had were the world's masterpieces. He learned the stories of the Bible at his mother's knee, and to its lofty precepts he resorted to his latest days. He had Shakespeare, Burns, Blackstone and Aesop's Fables, and these he studied with unceasing zeal. Drinking deep at these exhaustless fountains of knowledge and inspiration, he did not miss the rivulets into which men had drawn out their overflow. Having the keys of the treasure-house of literature he needed not the small coin of its shops.

If he lacked in social culture it was superseded by the rude amenities of frontier intercourse, which sharpened his faculties if they did not refine his manners. Born among

the "plain people," as he loved to call them, he understood their traits and feelings. His sympathies were ever with them and his services always at their command, and so, as he rose in position and influence, he kept their confidence and esteem. Accustomed from his childhood to self-reliance, he became an unerring judge of character. Without ostentatious profession, he was ever reverent of sacred things. "Show me," said he, "a church where the only requirement is to love God and to love man, and I will walk a hundred miles to join it."

To say that he was raised up to meet a great crisis is to state but half the truth. More than all other men combined he induced and developed to its tragic but beneficent end the crisis which had impended since the adoption of the constitution.

He demonstrated the fallacy of secession by declaring that if one or more states had the right to secede, the logical result was that all but one of the states might join in seceding and thus, in effect, expel a sovereign state from the Union against its will—a proposition which its rashest advocate had never had the temerity to advance.

During a trip to New Orleans in his early manhood he witnessed the brutality of the slave market, and from that hour became the inveterate foe of slavery. But such was his reverence for the Constitution that never, even in the throes of civil war, did he favor its forcible abolition until justified as a military necessity. His highest hope was for its restriction to the original slave states and to gradual extinction there through peaceful measures.

Loving the Union above all else, he felt, as much as any statesman has ever done, the binding obligation of the Constitution. Although slavery was abhorrent to every fibre of his being, he felt bound to recognize the protec-

tion which the Constitution afforded, until it became a choice between the Union and the Constitution.

When that moment came, and not till then, was he ready to destroy slavery, in spite of the Constitution, that the Union, which was the object of the Constitution, might survive. With dispassionate but relentless logic he pierced the sophistry of a hundred years and sounded the knell of its approaching doom. But such was the virulence of feeling that while he became an object of violent hatred to the slave interest, this most puissant of champions was scorned and reviled by the abolitionists because, in his conservatism, he respected the Constitution.

After his nomination Wendell Phillips referred to him as "this huckster in politics who does not know whether he has any opinions."

Lincoln was indeed a politician of the most pronounced type, but he belonged to a class of whom the country to-day needs more and not less. There are politicians and—politicians. Some are like the mercenary troops in earlier days—at the service of the highest bidder. But there is a large and honorable class who, actuated by deep-seated principles, loyally, fearlessly and proudly follow the flag of their faith in victory or defeat, whether assigned to duty in the ranks or leading gloriously on the ramparts. Of this class the most prominent example of the century was Abraham Lincoln. First defeated for the legislature of Illinois at the age of twenty-three, he tried again with better results and was for eight years a member of that body—twice being an unsuccessful candidate for speaker. Four years later he was elected to congress. Then he was an unsuccessful candidate for the commissionership of the general land office. He was twice defeated for the United States senate.

His debate with Douglas proved him to be a consummate master of his art, as well as one of the keenest logicians of his day. The Dred Scott decision, upon

which the southern democrats based their assumptions, and from which they brooked no dissent, had declared slavery to be inherently right, under the Constitution, and therefore entitled to protection in all the territories and the states to be formed out of them. Douglas had already pronounced in favor of "popular sovereignty," or the right of each new state to allow or prohibit slavery. Between these two irreconcilable positions Lincoln drove Douglas to a choice. If he declared for slavery he would lose the senatorial election and alienate the support of the northern democracy for the presidency. If he adhered to popular sovereignty he was in danger of losing the South. Escape was impossible. He chose the latter alternative, and defeated Lincoln for the senate, but two years later the South refused to support him for the presidency, and put another ticket in the field. The party strength was thus divided, and Lincoln was elected by a minority of the popular vote.

But, with all his adroitness, he was no demagogue. He did not hesitate to accept the position of attorney for the Illinois Central Railroad Company while he was a candidate for the senate. When addressing an assemblage of workingmen he said :

Labor was prior to capital, but property is the fruit of labor. Let no man, therefore, who is houseless, pull down the house of another, but let him labor diligently to build one for himself, thus assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built.

In the administration of his high office he proved himself a statesman of the first order. From the day when he demonstrated his skill as a diplomat in the revision of Seward's famous dispatch to our minister at the court of St. James, to the last important official act of his life, relating to reconstruction, subsequent events have not only justified his policies, but have shown that any material variance during the war would have been fraught with disaster.

As an orator he has contributed to the world's literature some of its choicest gems.

The closing lines of his first inaugural, with which he concluded a firm but pathetic protest against secession, were as touching as they were prophetic.

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Two years and a half later, standing upon Gettysburg's immortal heights, he uttered this classic tribute, which will be forever linked to the story of that historic ground :

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

The following, from his second inaugural, was his last public expression of a general character. Its lofty and benevolent strain transcends mere human diction and breathes the spirit of the sublimest utterances of Holy Writ :

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be repaid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years

ago, so still it must be said 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Entrusted with supreme command of a military establishment, compared with which the armaments of ancient and modern times shrink into insignificance, and covering a field of operations of vast extent, he proved himself master of the situation and was in fact, as well as name, the commander in chief. Sagacious in selecting and loyal in supporting his great commanders, he made possible the illustrious achievements and fadeless renown of Grant and Sherman and Thomas and Sheridan and their compatriots, whose place in history is secure.

And how he loved the common soldiers! No man ever wielded such power with such tenderness and magnanimity. The Illinois circuit-rider who dismounted in the storm to restore the young birds to the nest from which they had been blown, became the soft-hearted president who went from cot to cot through the hospitals, and who subverted military discipline by the frequency of his reprieves. The records of the executive departments teem with his correspondence in behalf of the condemned and with messages of sympathy to the bereaved. The funeral literature of all time contains no tribute more tender and expressive than this which he sent to an afflicted mother just after his second election:

Dear Madam: I have been shown, in the files of the war department, a statement of the adjutant general of Massachusetts, that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

The quaint and humorous drollery which characterized him throughout life, and which, at the outset of his national career, often provoked the sarcasm of offended dignity, was but the alloy that strengthened his fine nature for the discharge of duties and responsibilities else too heavy to be borne; and, though his humor sometimes bordered on coarseness or indelicacy, this was but the dross in a character whose substance was otherwise of purest gold.

While traitors were secretly plotting or openly attempting the destruction of the Union, while the shafts of calumny from foes and carping criticism from those who should have been friends, were falling thick around him,—under the weight of burdens and vexations seemingly too grievous to be borne, he cherished no malice in his heart, his lips gave utterance to no abuse. Believing in the justice of God, and basing his conduct upon principles that antedated the decalogue and will survive the wreck of human laws and constitutions, he wrought in faith and patience to the end, and so he came to be the incarnation of the regenerated brain, heart and conscience of the nation.

And yet you shall search the pages of history in vain for a parallel to the national career of seven swift, eventful years which transformed the unknown Illinois politician into the foremost figure of his century. If we would learn the secret of that social alchemy by which the son of the Kentucky pioneer, reared in the narrow circle of frontier privation, became the ruler whose sagacious leadership in the crisis of the republic withstood the criticism of statesmen and savants, and won the lasting homage of mankind, may we not find its solution in that immortal sentence of his, which was expressed in every act of that earnest, patient, sagacious life:

Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.

The century opened with peans of acclaim to Napoleon, "the man of destiny," beneath whose tread the continent of Europe quaked for twenty years. The century is drawing to its close, and, in the sculptured pomp of his stately tomb upon the Seine, beneath the purple dome of the Hotel des Invalides, amid the marble emblems of his victories and surrounded by his battle flags, the great emperor sleeps in the icy calm of death. The empire which he founded has vanished like the figment of a dream. But the republic of Washington and Lincoln endures. The bond of union, though strained by civil war, was yet strong enough to withstand the test, and from ocean to ocean, and from lake to gulf, the arms that once were raised to strike are now outstretched to shield. The race whose triumphant and civilizing march has known no halt from Plymouth Rock to the Philippines, as in the past, so in the present, and in all the days to come, true to the precepts of the founders and saviors of the republic, and within the limits of its Constitution, will accept the duties and responsibilities imposed by Providence, and without fear or faltering, move on to the fulfillment of its high and continuing destiny.

He who seeks the embodiment of the genius of the Union finds it in the apotheosis of the Great Emancipator. There, under the arching skies, he stands, erect, serene, resplendent; beneath his feet the broken shackles of a race redeemed; upon his brow the diadem of liberty with law, while around and behind him rise up, as an eternal guard of honor, the great army of the republic.

In the belief that from the martyr's bier, as from the battlefield of right, it is but one step to paradise, may we not, on days like this, draw back the veil that separates from our mortal gaze the phantom squadrons as they pass again in grand review before their "martyr president"—

"In solid platoons of steel,
Under heaven's triumphal arch,
The long lines break and wheel,
And the order is 'Forward, March!'

The colors ripple o'erhead,
The drums roll up to the sky,
And with martial time and tread
The regiments all pass by—
The ranks of the faithful dead
Meeting their president's eye.

March on, your last, brave mile!
Salute him, star and lace!
Form 'round him, rank and file,
And look on the kind, rough face!

But the quaint and homely smile
Has a glory and a grace
It had never known erstwhile,
Never in time or space.

Close 'round him, hearts of pride!
Press near him, side by side!
For he stands there not alone;
For the holy right ye died,
And Christ, the crucified,
Waits to welcome his own."

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